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Conversations
Research and Choreographic Analysis

Aaron Roberts

Submitted in Partial Completion of the
Requirements for Commonwealth Honors in Dance

Bridgewater State University

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Dr. Jody Weber, Thesis Director
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Bridgewater State University

Conversations

Research and Choreographic Analysis

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Abstract

Hegemony is a system in which power is acquired, maintained and purposed to control events and discourses as a means of dictating what is normal.¹ Hegemonic ideologies concerning masculinity control the way in which the male body is perceived and dictate the acceptable expression of 'manhood'.² Furthermore, these hegemonic ideologies dictate the perception of alternative expressions of the male body through discursive devices of fear and rejection, such as homophobia³ and racism.⁴

Conversations is a collection of three works of choreography created in response to the hegemonic structures that dictate the perception of masculinity. The first, *The Trouble with Masculinity*, enters into the mind of a male questioning the boundaries of defined masculinity, leading to a display of this questioning nature within the context of two males in relation to one another. The second, *A Look Inside*, explores the struggle between the individual and social ideologies intended to regulate the subjective identity of the individual. The third, *Breakthrough*, introduces the path toward personal acceptance, highlighting the determination needed to overcome restrictions as well as the necessity of proper support for true success.

In this thesis, the nature and effects of hegemonic ideologies concerning masculinity are explored as an inspirational foundation for the creation of *Conversations*. The choreography of *Conversations* is then analyzed and related to masculine ideologies.

¹ Emslie, Carol, Damien Ridge, Sue Ziebland, and Kate Hunt. 2006. "Men's accounts of Depression: Reconstructing or Resisting hegemonic masculinity?" *Social Science and Medicine* 2246-2257.

² Reeser, Todd W. 2010. *Masculinities in Theory; an Introduction*. Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

³ Burt, Ramsay. 2007. *The Male Dancer: Bodies, Spectacle, Sexualities*. 2nd. New York, New York: Routledge.

⁴ Reeser, Todd W. 2010. *Masculinities in Theory; an Introduction*

“Our idea of what men should be within Western culture is always shifting and will usually be in conflict with some of our ideas about masculinity and femininity within gender. I think most people would acknowledge the fact that the gender paradigm isn’t as rigid as society dictates, and that human beings aren’t only one-dimensional”

– Christian Burns (When Men Dance 2009)

Introduction

Throughout my childhood it was clear that many aspects of my identity were at odds with what was expected of me as an African American and a male. The struggle with these many contradictions inspired me to embark on the journey to change the fundamental aspects of my identity that were at odds with expectation; I sought to become a more acceptable version of myself. After about a decade on this detrimental journey, I began to realize that I had become a stranger to myself. No matter how hard I pushed, it was clear that I remained outside of acceptable social standards for men. I began to realize the futility of my efforts. I learned that my outer expression was so distanced from the connection to my genuine self that I became unable to form connections with the world around me. Furthermore, my efforts to suppress my true self opened the door to severe anxiety and depression, which left me broken with little desire to live. These experiences have become the catalyst spurring my inquiry into masculine ideology and social hegemony.

Art is an impactful medium that can play a strong role as the expression of our human experience. One participant’s personal response to a work of art will differ from another’s, which will ultimately differ from the inspiration of the artist due to individual experiences. This paper is not meant to be held as the sole source of interpretation for this piece of art. My intention when creating is to leave the interpretation to the viewer. On the contrary, this paper is meant to offer insight into the inspiration that guided and influenced my own decision making as the creator of the “Conversations”.

The Trouble with Masculinity

What is Masculinity?

Todd Reeser, a theorist of masculine ideologies and the author of *Masculinity in Theory*, contended that masculinity is a fabricated concept with no definite, traceable origin.⁵ It cannot be isolated as beginning in a single place or at a single point in time. Rather, the fluidity of masculinity is seen throughout history as being both created and challenged in many ways.⁶ As social perspectives shift, the definition of masculinity must shift to fit the roles of males in a society, thereby maintaining a social order.⁷ Consequently, masculinity becomes a social construct that is disseminated through social and familial education.

The social tools for the education of masculine ideologies are both direct and indirect in nature. Each tool has its specific function in the large-scale process of constructing masculinity as ideology. These tools of ideological construction exist through the utilization of myths, images, discourses and practices.⁸ For example, if a father has a natural interest in baseball and wants his son to share this interest, he will expose his son to the sport through playing catch, talking about the sport, enrolling the child in youth leagues and so on. As the son develops, such traditions and practices can instill a personal sense of understanding and appreciation for the sport, as well as an association to the sport as a means to connect with his father. “When men perform various actions on a regular basis, they may be held within an ideology of masculinity... As these aspects of ideology influence practices, these practices in turn also serve to construct masculinity”.⁹ On an ideological level, the predominance of men in the sport as well as the son’s

⁵ Reeser, Todd W. 2010. *Masculinities in Theory; an Introduction*. Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

⁶ Reeser, Todd W. 2010. *Masculinities in Theory; an Introduction*.

⁷ Reeser, Todd W. 2010. *Masculinities in Theory; an Introduction*.

⁸ Reeser, Todd W. 2010. *Masculinities in Theory; an Introduction*.

⁹ Reeser, Todd W. 2010. *Masculinities in Theory; an Introduction*.

practice with the father plays into masculine ideology by creating an association to the sport as a normal acceptable male activity. Through constant and unavoidable repetition within culture, the tools of ideological construction are eventually made to seem natural, thereby avoiding suspicions or interrogations¹⁰ with little regard for the many individuals excluded by their differing male expressions.

Masculinity and Dance

Hegemonic constructs use aspects of the dominating culture of masculinity to depict the body in such a way that reflects what we believe the male body is and should be.¹¹ Dance is considered by many a part of a woman's domain due in part to its close association with attributes commonly perceived as feminine; such as intuition, expression and the body.^{12,13,14,15} Such an inaccurate consideration finds much of its origin in the dualistic Cartesian philosophy that separates mind from body¹⁶ which allows for the historically common perception that the intellectual, culture and mind are elements of masculinity.¹⁷ Consequently, male participation in dance is discouraged by hegemonic ideologies as divergent from acceptable masculine behavior. In many cases, this discouragement is conveyed through discourse about male dancers and enforced through homophobic abuse. For this reason, the field of dance is overwhelmingly saturated with women, thereby feeding into the perception that dance is a woman's domain.

¹⁰ Reeser, Todd W. 2010. *Masculinities in Theory; an Introduction*.

¹¹ Reeser, Todd W. 2010. *Masculinities in Theory; an Introduction*.

¹² Risner, Doug. 2009. "What We Know About Boys Who Dance." In *Men Who Dance*, edited by Jennifer Fisher and Shay Anthony, 57-77. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹³ Fisher, Jennifer, and Anthony Shay. 2009. *When Men Dance*. Edited by Jennifer Fisher and Anthony Shay. New York, New York: Oxford University Press.

¹⁴ Burt, Ramsay. 2009. "The Performance of Unmarked Masculinity." In *When Men Dance*

¹⁵ Blashill, Aaron, and Kimberly Powlishta. 2009. "Gay Stereotypes: The Use of Sexual Orientation as a Cue for Gender-Related Attributes." *Sex Roles* 783-793.

¹⁶ Radner, Daisie. 1971. "Descartes' Notion of the Union of Mind and Body." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 9 (2): 159-170. Accessed December 2015. https://muse.jhu.edu.libserv-prd.bridgew.edu/journals/journal_of_the_history_of_philosophy/v009/9.2radner.pdf.

¹⁷ Risner, Doug. 2009. "What We Know About Boys Who Dance." In *Men Who Dance*

Many boys who participate in dance face a perpetual social suspicion of their masculinity and sexuality from which boys in other athletic disciplines and team sports escape.¹⁸ Furthermore, gay male youth in dance face an even greater social challenge of being marginalized as a male and participating in a marginalized discipline.¹⁹ Therefore, for many young males, the pressures of hegemonic discourse and homophobic abuse succeed in diverting them from beginning or continuing participation in dance. This unbalanced distribution of perspectives not only limits the legitimacy and importance of the discipline among institutions formed by masculine hegemony (e.g. education, sciences, business, medicine), but also places limits on the range of expression allowed as masculine for males who continue participation.

As an artistic discipline in which the predominant vehicle of expression is the body²⁰, dance has the potential to address and challenge the regulation of gender expression and the body through abusive hegemony. In the essay *Performance of Unmarked Masculinity* (2009), Ramsay Burt explained that “dance is an area through which, as embodied beings, we negotiate the social and cultural discourses [by] which gender and sexuality are maintained”.²¹ This negotiation in which Burt refers takes place in all aspects that are involved in the discipline. For example, male and female dancers can pose a threat to ideologies that support the rhetoric of masculine hegemony or support of them through the way in which they perform. Choreographers hold the same power through the way in which they ask their dancers, both male and female, to perform as well as through the nature of the work they create. Unfortunately, due to the continued disproportionality of males to females participating in dance and the desire for dance to be a

¹⁸ Hackney, Peggy. 2000. *Making Connections: Total Body Integration Through Bartenieff Fundamentals*. Routledge.

¹⁹ Hackney, Peggy. 2000. *Making Connections: Total Body Integration Through Bartenieff Fundamentals*.

²⁰ Hackney, Peggy. 2000. *Making Connections: Total Body Integration Through Bartenieff Fundamentals*.

²¹ Burt, Ramsay. 2009. "The Performance of Unmarked Masculinity." In *When Men Dance*

legitimized medium in the hegemonic world, many artists give in to the pressure to adhere to limiting standards of masculinity. This sort of surrender gives way to a wide array of compromises within the discipline with the hope of conforming to the appearance of a sport over an art form. For example, when training and hiring male dancers, athleticism and virtuosity become paramount over artistry and expression.²² Many professional male dancers have attested to being told to “dance like a man” or to “dance more heterosexual” when auditioning and throughout rehearsals.²³

Analysis

This section of “Conversations” is the introduction that acts as a bridge from my research and ideas about masculinity to the artwork created, with the sound score as the main support of this bridge. The score at the start of the piece is characterized by various deep pulsing tones reminiscent of an inconsistent, anxious heartbeat played with a series of questions. These questions offer an open door to the internal dialogue of the male individual. The beginning dialogue states: “Can I tell that I am a man by anything beyond my physicality? I question myself. Am I a man?” These reflections are a motivation for the

individual’s movement which was inspired by the photography of Robert Mapplethorpe (Figure 1). The four poses depicted in the images became the foundation for the movement vocabulary created for this work. Images 1-3 show a man who appears to be struggling with the boundaries in which he is enclosed. When translated into movement

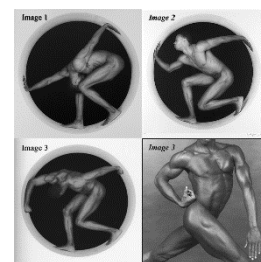


Figure 1 - Photography by Robert Mapplethorpe

vocabulary, Image 1 was the ending position of a central movement of the hands outward from the core to the far reach space, portraying a sense of pushing away the boundary. Image 2 was a

²² Gard, Michael. 2008. *Men Who Dance*. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.

²³ Jennifer Fisher and Anthony Shay, eds. 2009. *When Men Dance*. New York, New York: Oxford University Press.

central movement toward the mid reach space, portraying the sense of the boundary closing inward on the core. Image three is a movement within the boundary that is now in the mid reach space. The boundary in this depictions are the social limitations of hegemonic ideologies concerning masculinity. The visual and auditory display of the struggle with these ideologies culminates in the final pose inspired by Image 4. This pose is a pose of honest strength intermingled with doubt to convey the resolve of the individual in the midst of this reflective inquiry. The movements are executed at upstage left with the individual facing either directly upstage, stage left or stage right in order to exclude the audience from the individual's internal inquiry. The individual only acknowledges the audience through a glance between the third and fourth movement, the nature of which is meant to offer the alternate interpretation for the purpose of the fourth pose. By acknowledging the presence of the audience, the forth pose has the potential to represent "posturing" for external observers.

The score continues with, "I identify as a man and I know that there are levels of femininity within myself. How do I reconcile that with my masculinity?" This statement offers insight for the audience into who the individual is and why it is he is struggling. The individual faces the audience for this portion in order to convey that he has invited them into his reflections. The vocabulary is characterized initially by upper body gestures containing predominantly central movements coupled with periphery movements – movements along the parameters of the reach space. The individual then revisits the opening movements with added periphery movements as transitions between the shapes while the score asks "Am I bound to these continuous revolving reflections of who I should be?" The circularity of periphery motion visually echoes the dialogue.

The next section of questions in the score contain three pairs introducing two potential paths of thought by asking “Can we change our perception of what we consider masculine? Or are we bound to see the body in an unchanging way?” and “Do we even need to consider someone masculine or feminine? Or are we bound to see the body in an unchanging way?” In asking these questions the individual is reflecting upon the nature of cultural discourses of what is masculine and what is not. Reeser speaks of how the process of minimizing variations in the perception of the body is a means for controlling how the body is understood.²⁴ This line of questioning ends by asking, “Can we release ourselves from these labels and distinctions?” The movement throughout this section of questioning is a further developed version of the previous upper body gesturing and lower body movement that is particularly characterized by 180 degree direction changes in order to convey a sense of back and forth that echoes that of the line of questioning.

The costume choice for the individual is tied intimately with the particular line of questioning this section. The individual is costumed in a white tee shirt with the longest portions of the tee shirt falling just above his knees with a wine colored skirt. This costume was chosen as a blatant challenge to “acceptable” male dress. This serves to deepen the questioning nature of this piece and further set the individual apart from the masculine ideologies against which he struggles. In seeking to push the boundaries of hegemonic ideologies of masculinity, his attire expresses a departure from the current ‘norm’ that defines and limits the way that the body is presented.²⁵ By asking if we are bound to see the body in an unchanging way, the individual is questioning the expectation that is placed on his clothing choices, hair styles and even movement

²⁴ Reeser, Todd W. 2010. *Masculinities in Theory; an Introduction*.

²⁵ Reeser, Todd W. 2010. *Masculinities in Theory; an Introduction*.

characteristics. Is it even necessary to decide whether clothing is for men or women? Or a toy for a boy or a girl? Furthermore, these distinctions extend to emotional expression in that the “acceptable” male have historically been that of power, strength, dominance and control while the expression of traits such as empathy, nurturance and sensitivity have been labeled female traits.²⁶ The encouragement of these distinctions has created a culture in which men are typically offered little by way of vocabulary for emotional expression and are often discouraged from engaging in such expression.²⁷ The individual questions these ideologies that encourage these sort of distinctions because of their power to diminish the human experience.²⁸

The final section of dialogue is a transition into the second portion of this piece. It begins with the same questions that were posed in the beginning – “Am I a man?” The questions continue further to ask, “Can I trust what I see in others? I question myself. Does anybody question me?” The original upper body gesturing inspired by the Mapplethorpe photographs are revisited on the low level to offer a change in discussion from the struggle with internal reflections to the struggle with the external influences that can serve as a reinforcement of internalized ideologies. A second male dancer enters within this transition. The sound score of the uneven pulses ends with a chime and *Three Times* by Simon Wood begins. The content of this duet centers on the exchange between the new dancer and the original individual. The inspiration for the design of this section was found in a quote by Reeser; “If the dialogue between me and my body defines an element of my masculinity, so does the dialogue between my body and other bodies. That dialogue can be created by two discrete bodies – my imagined body and another one that I perceive. [The] relation between his body and mine defines

²⁶ Blashill, Aaron, and Kimberly Powlishta. 2009. "Gay Stereotypes: The Use of Sexual Orientation as a Cue for Gender-Related Attributes."

²⁷ Emslie, et al. 2006. "Men's accounts of Depression: Reconstructing or Resisting hegemonic masculinity?"

²⁸ Risner, Doug. 2009. "What We Know About Boys Who Dance."

masculinity for me or for him, a dialogue that is different for each of us”.²⁹ This physical dialogue in which Reeser is referring here is an unspoken one that helps to perpetuate and reinforce pre-existing discourse on masculinity. For example, a male child can take cues on how to act as a man from his father or other prominent male adults in their life fashioning an unspoken belief of the physical behavior of a man. In the same manner, this duet is a depiction of a male struggling with their own ideas about masculinity in the same space as another man. The second man’s disposition toward masculine ideology is irrelevant in this section. The dancer’s vocabulary is completely improvised and disconnected from the vocabulary of the individual. This is done to create an unpredictable element within the design to remove the audience from any specific interpretation of this newly introduced dancer other than his discreet identity.

The duet is divided into three interconnecting sections. The duet begins with the original dancer on the low level and the stranger in the middle level, upstage of the other dancer. The first dancers begins a low level phrase that incorporates his base gestures of struggling with ideologies while the other dancer begins to stumble from one point to the next using various improvised pathways. The intention is to accentuate the juxtaposition between the continuously travelling dancer and the relatively stationary dancer, thereby portraying the second dancer as an influence discreet from the first dancer.

The two dancers remain disconnected throughout the second section with the influential dancer facing the audience directly and the first dancer facing directly stage right. The first dancer turns to face his influence when adopting a movement, yet the second dancer never displays acknowledgement of the first dancer thereby representing the passive nature of his

²⁹ Reeser, Todd W. 2010. *Masculinities in Theory; an Introduction*.

influence. His influence is meant to be through his existence in the first dancer's awareness. Thereby, conveying a relationship between masculine discourse and the individual through the individual's adoption of the other dancer's movement.

The moment of the discreet influence's awareness of the individual acts as a transition to the final section. This moment is characterized through the adoption of the individual's vocabulary by the influence. The two meet in a moment of shared acknowledgement and circle each other in confrontation. What follows is the change in influence from passive to direct manipulation. This is displayed through the direct reshaping of the individual dancer's body. This direct manipulation is the representation of the aggressive discursive tools used to enforce hegemonic ideologies, like homophobia, sexism and racism.³⁰

A Look Inside

The development of *A Look Inside* was hardly a linear process. In fact, I did not even understand what I was creating when I began working with the dancers. As I contemplated the information that I had gathered to aid in my creative process, the personal reflections and the explorative experiences, I began to find a direction for my creation. As the piece evolved I began to understand the story that I was trying to tell. I returned to Reeser's statements about "problem masculinities" such as the criminal, violent and sexualized masculinity attributed to African American men.³¹ I reflected further upon the implications of my own sexual orientation to my manhood within both the African American community and the broader community of human beings. Additionally, just as homophobia is used to disguise fear of not acting like a man,³² I believe that the use of hegemony to maintain social order is meant to control the 'other' and how

³⁰Reeser, Todd W. 2010. *Masculinities in Theory; an Introduction*.

³¹ Reeser, Todd W. 2010. *Masculinities in Theory; an Introduction*.

³² Bucher, Jacob. 2014. "'But He Can't Be Gay': The Relationship Between Masculinity and Homophobia in Father-Son Relationships." *The Journal of Men's Studies* 222-237.

they are perceived. *A Look Inside* is an acknowledgement of the devices used to maintain control as well as a display of courage in the face of the desire to bring order to the 'other' by rejecting and suppressing their appearance.

Masculine Hegemony and "The Other"

Had my journey of inner destruction been an isolated anomaly in an otherwise flawless social order, there would be no reason to criticize or test the collective social understanding and support of normalized masculine ideologies. The elements of my journey are hardly isolated, nor are they an anomaly among American males. In fact, adhering to a normalized construct like masculinity affects the wellbeing of more than just males. "Men and woman, straight, gay, or lesbians, as well as intersex and transsexual people, all suffer as a result of limited, normative definitions of masculinity".³³ As the dominant means of social regulation, masculine ideologies are used to reject and vilify "the other"³⁴. Social regulation aids in defining normative masculinity by requiring the identification of the "other" as a means to establish what unacceptable expressions of masculinity are. Reeser explained this round about process of establishing normativity. "Because masculinity can often function as an invisible norm, it might be harder to locate normalized masculinity in a given discourse than to locate same-sex male sexuality or other "problem" masculinities, such as criminal, violent, or sexualized African American masculinity and effeminate or "castrated" Jewish or Asian masculinity".² By identifying these more visible structures of masculinity and distinguishing them as opposing the norm, a system of power is created to control gender discourse^{35,36,37} through shame,

³³ Burt, R. (2009). The Performance of Unmarked Masculinity. In J. Fisher, & S. Anthony, *When Men Dance*

³⁴ Reeser, T. W. (2010). *Masculinities in Theory; an Introduction*. Chichester, West Sussex, United Kingdom: John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

³⁵ Gard, M. (2008). *Men Who Dance*. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.

³⁶ Risner, Doug. 2009. "What We Know About Boys Who Dance." In *Men Who Dance*

³⁷ Reeser, T. W. (2010). *Masculinities in Theory; an Introduction*

intimidation, abuse and reeducation. Therefore, efforts to confront these normative ideas of “acceptable” masculinity have ethical value.³⁸

When addressing the damaging nature of normative masculinity, it is necessary to examine and understand the ideology which encourages exclusion. As the driving force behind the open social rejection of troubled and alternative masculinities, hegemony is employed to validate the normative masculine ideology. “Hegemony is about the ‘winning and holding of power’ and having the ability to dictate the terms in which events are understood so that they appear ‘natural’ and ‘normal’”.³⁹ The masculine hegemony asserts its influence as a means to dictate what is normal, good and acceptable. The prevailing hegemonic ideology concerning masculinity seeks to normalize and categorize expressions of the body. Limiting the variations of the male body and normalizing it, cultural discourses may better control how it is understood, thereby assigning preexistent meaning to signs of the body.⁴⁰ This preexistent meaning manifests itself as a stereotype applied to all people within a given group. For example, a male that acts or dresses in a way that is typically considered feminine may be labeled homosexual as one of the markers of same-sex male sexuality has been identified as femininity in a male. This label will stand thanks to the hegemonic discourse which dictates the markers of a homosexual man, regardless of actual sexual orientation. Male dancers, for example, participate in a physical activity of expression, which has been considered feminine by many ideologies.⁴¹ Young boys who dance experience derision and homophobic abuse for their interest in dance, many of whom are not even old enough to have a developed sexual identity.⁴²

³⁸ Gard, M. (2008). *Men Who Dance*. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.

³⁹ Emslie, Carol, Damien Ridge, Sue Ziebland, and Kate Hunt. 2006. "Men's accounts of Depression: Reconstructing or Resisting hegemonic masculinity?" *Social Science and Medicine* 2246-2257.

⁴⁰ Reeser, T. W. (2010). *Masculinities in Theory; an Introduction*

⁴¹ Gard, M. (2008). *Men Who Dance*. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.

⁴² Risner, Doug. 2009. "What We Know About Boys Who Dance." In *Men Who Dance*

With regards to homosexuality, the mechanism through which hegemonic ideology is employed to divert from alternative masculinities is the practice of homophobia. Jacob Bucher describes the practice of homophobia as fulfilling the major purpose of abusively enforcing an acceptable heterosexual masculinity. Bucher asserts that homophobia is “more about a fear of not acting like a man than it is about a fear of liking men. [Just] as heterosexuality is part of ‘being a man’, so too is denying the masculinity of gay men”.⁴³ Thus, same-sex male sexuality is labeled as lacking the masculine gender expression. Therefore those that bear indication within their body and behavior of homosexuality become vulnerable to abuse by those who exhibit hegemonic gender expressions. Furthermore, the acceptance, perpetuation and encouragement of this homophobic abuse by adult males creates an example for young boys and has a firm hand in shaping the masculine identities of both gay and straight men.⁴⁴ This abuse marks some men as culturally subordinate, expelling them from the ‘circle of legitimacy’.⁴⁵ It is through the discursive practice of homophobia that young boys learn what a man is “supposed” to be; how the male body is supposed to present itself and utilize its strengths. Consequently, the same lesson is being forced upon those boys who exhibit the markers of homosexuality, teaching these developing males that their bodies are unacceptable and at best secondary to a more normative male expression.

Just as masculine ideology is used to assert regulations on variations in sexual masculinity, the hegemonic construct is also used for mediation of racial variations in masculinity. The current hegemonic construct of masculinity finds many of its origins in

⁴³ Bucher, Jacob. 2014. ""But He Can't Be Gay": The Relationship Between Masculinity and Homophobia in Father-Son Relationships." *The Journal of Men's Studies* 222-237.

⁴⁴ Emslie et al. 2006. "Men's accounts of Depression: Reconstructing or Resisting hegemonic masculinity?"

⁴⁵ Risner, Doug. 2009. "What We Know About Boys Who Dance." In *Men Who Dance*

European culture.⁴⁶ When European explorers ventured out to foreign lands they encountered various cultures that held ideologies and practices that did not line up with their own. Thus, these cultures were labeled savages and forced into submission under the hegemony of the prevailing ideologies and practices,⁴⁷ whose dominance was reinforced by the masculine ideals.⁴⁸ This same sense of culturally hegemonic masculine ideals manifests today through racial unacceptance and domination. Reeser used the example of the “criminal, violent, or sexualized African American masculinity” to show the use of culturally dominating ideals and practices to control “problem” masculinities.⁴⁹ “The criminal black male body can be arrested, incarcerated, and feared, leaving the white male body to discipline and control the other’s fate”.⁵⁰ By treating African American masculinity in this way, Reeser expounded, the white male body within the nexus of hegemony is “constructed as not a problem”, thereby remaining hidden from discourse as the “incarnation of the norm”. Reeser’s example of masculine hegemony creates the African American male body as subordinate to that of the Anglo-American male body. This ideological practice is the driving force behind institutionalized racial biases as well as unbalanced perceptions of hegemony within the African American community.

In the same way that the introduction of a foreign vine dominates and disrupts entire ecosystems, so does the imposition of external hegemonic constructs on an entire culture dominate and disrupt the practices of that culture. Within the African American community, for example, the prevailing masculine hegemony has labeled the African American male body as

⁴⁶ Burt, Ramsay. 2007. *The Male Dancer: Bodies, Spectacle, Sexualities*. 2nd. New York, New York: Routledge.

⁴⁷ Spring, Joel H. 2013. *Deculturalization and the struggle for equality: a brief history of the education of dominated cultures in the United States*. New York: The McGraw-Hill Companies.

⁴⁸ Emslie et al. 2006. "Men's accounts of Depression: Reconstructing or Resisting hegemonic masculinity?"

⁴⁹ Reeser, Todd W. 2010. *Masculinities in Theory; an Introduction*

⁵⁰ Spring, Joel H. 2013. *Deculturalization and the struggle for equality: a brief history of the education of dominated cultures in the United States*.

unequal to the Anglo-American male body for generations. Such ideological practices have played a major role in masculine ideology among African American males, leading to repeated bodily practices within the culture to establish a dominant sense of “man-hood”.⁵¹ James Doyle offered an example of such bodily practices in *The Male Experience*. “[Many] African American men – especially those in the lower socioeconomic groups – have learned to posture or pose themselves as if to tell everyone who sees them, ‘Hey look at me, I’m somebody!’ when the whole world seems to conspire to scream in their face ‘You’re a nobody!’”.⁵² Generations of emasculating ideology and practices have conveyed the message of inequality based on a physical difference within the body. I believe this message has driven males to take on a posture, the appearance of power, to mask the sense of powerlessness felt in the face of such crippling rejection from the male population as a whole. This posture can portray aggression or considered indicative criminal behavior and resistance to the authorities that perpetuate the emasculating practices that fuel it.⁵³ Consequently, these bodily practices feed into the perception of the “problem” African American masculinity, promoting its separation from and validation of the hegemonic norm. Furthermore, the African American ideology of masculinity has historically employed homophobia as a means to dissuade young African American males from embodying any alternative masculine practices. World renowned choreographer and performer, Bill T. Jones, reflected on the nature of this tool for masculine construction in his autobiography *Last Night on Earth*. “I took a deep breath and volunteered that it was particularly hard for me to come out because blacks saw being gay as – and I chose my words very carefully – ‘the ultimate

⁵¹ Reeser, Todd W. 2010. *Masculinities in Theory; an Introduction*.

⁵² Doyle, James A. 1995. *The Male Experience*. 3rd. Edited by Michael Lang. Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown Communications Inc.

⁵³ Reeser, Todd W. 2010. *Masculinities in Theory; an Introduction*.

emasculatation of the black man’”.⁵⁴ The system of hegemony that devalues the masculinity of African American males as subordinate and delinquent also rejects the alternate masculinity of homosexual males. Therefore, within the already emasculated and oppressed population of African American males, homosexuality can be considered unacceptable and the African American body that expresses this identity can be considered unworthy to be called masculine. Thus, it is clear that masculine hegemony is a destructive force that consumes deviations in its wake.

Analysis

A Look Inside begins with a solo danced to poetry. The dancers are divided into two separate sets; a quartet and an individual. The quartet is intended to represent a constrained set; both a group representing society or social hegemony and a group representing the internal ideologies accepted by the individual. The interaction between the individual and the quartet is one of rejection in the poetry section. The poetry provides a sense of grappling with personal identity. The rejection of the quartet is shown by their movement to change facing away from the individual when the question “Who am I?” is asked. Each dancer in the quartet has a particular bodily shape that is angular in nature and is connected to one another via thick black straps. These elements serve as a display of the rigidity and restrictiveness of the quartet. When the quartet moves to change their facing away from the individual, they move with small bound steps. In doing so they display a greater sense of their constrained nature. The poem goes on to contemplate differences between the individual and those around them. The reflection progresses into a declaration of who the individual is not. By the end of this text, the gestural vocabulary of the individual has been established. Enter the quartet. This entrance into the conversation

⁵⁴ Jones, Bill T. 1995. *Last Night on Earth*. New York: Pantheon Books.

displays the gestural vocabulary of the group meant to represent social influence. These gestures contrast one another in diversity and movement elements.

The vocabulary of the quartet displays a sense of constraint through spoke-like directional movement, or movement that pierces outward in a direct and linear manner. Their movement is quick and cycles through a handful of repeated phrases and shapes. These types of movements were chosen for various reasons. Since my inspirational guidance was that of masculinity, the vocabulary consists of movements that would be characteristic of socially understood masculinity. Sustained, light and indirect movements were avoided as the softer appearance can be characteristic of feminine qualities. The diversity of the movement vocabulary was limited in order to represent the limited emotional vocabulary offered to men in our current social discourse.⁵⁵ Even when traveling, their movements are constricted. Three separate times within the piece the group moves through the space using a bound and direct side step. This mode of travel portrays a clear insincerity in approach. The heart of the group is not open to those they approach the individual.

All of the group movement factors are contrasted by the individual, whose movements were derived from the larger group's movement vocabulary. However, the movement of the individual is further developed to offer more complexity. This movement set is characterized by moments of free flow curve-like directional movements through both near and far reach space. Though this individual's vocabulary is still limited and repeated throughout the piece, the difference between it and that of the group's is meant to be distinguishable. As the individual travels through the space, their movement is intentional and unique.

⁵⁵ Whittle, Erin Louise, Andrea Susan Fogarty, Siena Tugendrajch, Michael J Player, Helen Christiansen, Kay Wilhelm, Dusan Hadzi-Pavlovic, and Judith Proudfoot. 2015. "Men, Depression, and Coping: Are We on the Right Path?" *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0039024>.

This piece taken as a whole is meant to display a relationship blended with a story. The relationship between the quartet and the individual is interchange between a micro display and a macro display. The micro display shows an internal struggle between the true self and the self that social regulation dictates “should” exist. Although the group is meant to be one entity, it is split into multiple elements in order to show the self through multiple voices. Each of these voices are constrained and can connect to the true self in one way or another. Some connections seem positive and mutual while others appear hostile, controlling and rejecting. Ultimately, all of the parts of the quartet are to keep the individual in line.

As the story progresses, the individual is repeatedly drawn into and breaking away from the quartet. The first moment that the individual is drawn into the quartet is a moment of submission after expressing their separation as an individual. The individual enters into a pose before the quartet approaches the dancer for the first time. One dancer from the quartet breaks away from the group and “corrects” the pose that the individual has chosen. This correction is met with an inspection of the individual by the entire group. The individual then falls into the group. From this point, the nature of the individual’s interactions with the each aspect of the constrained group is displayed.

A conscious decision was made to avoid a defined identity to the different aspects of the quartet. This decision allows for an open interpretation of the aspects by the viewer, allowing for this piece to speak to social ideologies that parallel masculinity.

There are moments during this section in which the aspects of the quartet and the individual share movement. This is meant to display the idea that all humans participating in any society share common attributes at their core. However, as the design is meant to display,

rejection comes with the expression of uniqueness and deviation from the requirements for acceptance within ideological systems ruled by hegemony.

After the rejection of the individual by all aspects of the quartet, the members of the quartet order the individual, through a pointing gesture, to a specific spot. This moment is intended as a display of hegemony ordering the individual to an acceptable position. In other words, the individual is told to “fall in line”. Once in place, the quartet begins a gestural phrase on the low level that is a variation on their established gestural vocabulary. The individual, however, does not join in with the majority of this vocabulary because of their inherent individual expression.

The quartet initially performs this phrase in unison. The unison breaks into a simultaneous canon of the same gestural phrase when the individual breaks away from the quartet, representing a disruption in social order as the individual rejects their required position with the hegemonic structure. The individual returns to a variation of their established vocabulary, thereby regaining power as an individual.

The quartet returns to a place of order as a member leaves the group to confront the individual. The confronting dancer enters into a movement exchange with the individual which concludes with no clear resolution. The individual transitions to a movement phrase that adopts and transforms the vocabulary of the quartet – characterized by a quicker tempo, new rhythm and a smoother, free flowing quality. The movement within this new phrase is strong so as to convey an expression of frustration within the individual. The remaining three of the quartet make movements to isolate the individual from the influenced member. The attempt at isolation begins the series of direct confrontations between the individual and the quartet. After observing and being influenced by the individual, the affected member moves to a position upstage of the

individual and begins to adopt the same vocabulary. The separation of the two dancers in this moment between upstage and downstage is important in establishing the feeling of disconnect between the two despite the adoption of shared movement. A portion of the new phrase adopted by the individual is repeated twice and a simple canon was used to portray a sense of similarity between the influenced dancer and the individual. The influenced dancer begins the phrase section when the individual begins the repetition. This shared frustration is motivated by the influenced dancer's frustration with the movement of the trio to isolate the two dancers. The individual becomes aware of this shared movement and approaches the influenced member to reach out. This action is ultimately rejected and the influenced member returns to the group.

The climax in the exchange between the quartet and the individual is represented by a simple level change. The individual is laying on the low level while the quartet is in a position of power, standing over the individual. At this moment, the individual begins the simple action of standing up as the quartet "slinks" down to the low level. The individual standing over the quartet conveys a picture of power in the favor of the individual. This shift of power is short and simple with no discernable motivation other than the individual's choice to stand thereby indicating the beginning of a shift in power. The individual begins a new phrase that is clear, free flowing and direct, blending established vocabulary. This movement quality was chosen to depict a simple declaration but not of anger and not rushed. This physical declaration is echoed in the spoken text after the music fades which states "I am who I am". The quartet is dispersed and the individual remains alone. This is a moment of victory as it portrays the individual free of the damaging social influences with which they struggled. This final moment is a representation of the struggle to take ownership of personal identity. Any human raised in the midst of society is subject to the ideologies that are taught through discourse and practice. In many instances,

such as with masculine ideologies, an individual's identity may be in opposition to these ideologies in some way. There is a choice to make in the face of this opposition with many potential paths to follow.

A Look Inside offers two potential paths from which an individual can choose. One path is concession and conformity. These established ideologies that tells a person what they should be is the ruler of that path. Once that path is walked there is only an unending struggle awaiting those who wish to leave. Power is never advocated lightly. Hegemonic systems will continue in their way and use their power to subdue those amongst their ranks seeking to become free.

The second path may be best understood through the reflections of Boethius in "The Consolation of Philosophy". Within this writing, the apparition named Philosophy maintains,

Why then do mortal men seek happiness outside yourselves, when it lies within you? You are led astray by error and ignorance... If I ask you whether there is anything more precious to you than your own self, you will say no. So if you are in possession of yourself you will possess something you would never wish to lose and something Fortune could never take away.⁵⁶

Although Philosophy is commenting on human happiness, I believe that there are very important parallels to this truth when considering a personal identity that is in opposition to societal expectations. If we can consider hegemonic ideology a belief system that paves a road to some form of acceptance, it can be argued that seeking acceptance by following this path is indicative of a need for external acceptance. Furthermore, if we consider external acceptance an object of value to be given, then we can conclude that it may also be taken away. In terms of masculinity, adherence to hegemonic structures gives the ideologies of masculinity the power to dictate whether someone's bodily expression is acceptable. Along with this power comes the power of the same ideologies to deem that same expression unacceptable. On the contrary, when an individual decides to take ownership over their own identity, they are finding their acceptance

⁵⁶ Boethius. 1969, 1999. *Boethius: The Consolation of Philosophy*. London: Penguin Classics.

within themselves.⁵⁷ Despite the opposition by ruling ideologies, their sense of who they are cannot be taken away; only abdicated by choice.

Breakthrough

Challenging the Paradigm

The paradigm of masculine hegemony is outdated at its best and severely detrimental to individuals and societies at its worst. From this paradigm alone we derive notions about gender such as what type of man is acceptable, what race or cultural background is superior, what sexuality is acceptable, how women should behave, and what activities are acceptable for men. Both men and women suffer from these narrow notions because these notions not only determine who can dance, but they also create clear boundaries on how each of the sexes are allowed to dance.⁵⁸ To bar males from artistry and expression is to adhere to the traditional values of masculinity that encourage emotional detachment, feigned bravado, feigned self-confidence, suppression of feelings and a sense of dominance⁵⁹ thereby diminishing all human experience. Thus, it is of the utmost importance that the dance community engage in challenging these notions and limitations from an embodied perspective because all of human experience in the world, including experiences with masculine hegemony, occur within the body.⁶⁰ Hence, Ramsay Burt (2009) admonished the community against ignoring these issues. “[If we] ignore important issues of sexual orientation, gender identity, and homophobic attitudes, [we] will be pragmatic and shortsighted, forfeiting vast opportunities for educating the dance profession and our highly confused culture about its sexuality and discrimination”.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Fisher, Jennifer, and Anthony Shay. 2009. *When Men Dance*

⁵⁸ Jennifer Fisher and Anthony Shay, eds. 2009. *When Men Dance*.

⁵⁹ Risner, Doug. 2009. "What We Know About Boys Who Dance." In *Men Who Dance*

⁶⁰ Reeser, Todd W. 2010. *Masculinities in Theory; an Introduction*.

⁶¹ Risner, Doug. 2009. "What We Know About Boys Who Dance." In *Men Who Dance*

Considering dance can act as an unspoken language of the body as well as masculine ideology's irrefutable connection to language, discourse and the body,⁶² it would be reasonable to believe that the discussion of masculinity and gender in general can be greatly influenced by this discipline. Both sexes have normative gender expectations held over their heads as the standard for behavior and appearance, however dance can become a means to expose these expectations and offer an alternative approach to the understanding of gender expression by encouraging personal awareness of and responsibility for the body. "One cannot refuse to perform the gender that is ascribed to [them], but as [they] can lay claim to [their] own body, [they] lay claim to the means through which [they] respond to and interpret this demand".⁶³ As a construct that is so deeply embedded in our social order, there is little hope that ideals concerning gender and gender assignment can be fully eradicated. However, awareness of the body and the physical responses to perceived obligations and restrictions of a given gender can offer the opportunity to challenge these perceptions and create a unique, yet equally valid, expression of gender. Take of example a man who finds that he has a large capacity for nurturing care and empathy. He may realize that society's perspective of his masculine expression is less than acceptable for a man, due to the prevalence of these typically feminine traits.⁶⁴ If this man takes ahold of his own characteristics in light of social expectations by exercising his nurturing care and empathy, I believe that these traits become a part of his male identity and thus a part of *his* masculine expression. In speaking of the demand for masculinity in male dancers, Michel Gervais stated, "I was still trying to discover myself, and as I became more comfortable in my skin, I became more masculine".⁶⁵

⁶² Reeser, Todd W. 2010. *Masculinities in Theory; an Introduction*.

⁶³ Risner, Doug. 2009. "What We Know About Boys Who Dance." In *Men Who Dance*

⁶⁴ Reeser, Todd W. 2010. *Masculinities in Theory; an Introduction*.

⁶⁵ Jennifer Fisher and Anthony Shay, eds. 2009. *When Men Dance*.

Analysis

Breakthrough is best described by the three sections of the sound score; *Halfway out of the Dark* by The Poet & The Prophet (Appendix 1a), *The Cascades* by Fleet Foxes, and *The Incline* by The Poet & The Prophet (Appendix 1b). The sound score coupled with the design drive the meaning behind this section. As the score progresses from one piece to the next, the dancers move the area in which they move from upstage left to downstage right while maintaining their focus toward downstage right. Downstage right is meant as a representation of a destination in a journey. In context of *Conversations*, this the destination is a place of greater self-acceptance. In fact, the original name of this section was Journey to Acceptance. I chose the pathway of the piece to progress from upstage left to downstage right because traveling along the diagonals of the stage is indicative of a journey as it is the longest traveling pathway of the stage space. Furthermore, moving from stage left to stage right creates a sense of visual resistance from the audience perspective. Instead of focusing from left to right, the direction of eye motion that is common to the American eye as a result of our reading and writing pattern, the audience's focus is from right to left. These factors were utilized with the intent of conveying the sense of a difficult journey that requires determination to progress.

The first section of the score begins with the dancers in the upstage left corner of the stage and remains in this portion of the stage for the remainder of the section. All of the movement is characterized by a desire to move toward downstage right. All movement that draws the dancers toward the desired destination inevitable "hits a wall", the diagonal through center stage from upstage right to downstage left, and is drawn back away. With every draw back however, there is a renewed determination to move forward. The final shape of this section is constructed with all dancers except one still with their focus toward downstage right and a single

arm pointed toward their destination. The one dancer stands at the front of the remaining dancer with a hand up as if against the barrier that is holding them from moving forward.

Halfway out of the Dark is a unique section from the rest of *Conversations* as a result of the predominance of certain relationship design elements. During creation, the movement vocabulary was created to be a direct translation of every word in the first couple of lines where each word had a corresponding gesture. As words were repeated the corresponding gesture was inserted into whatever shape the dancer was in at that moment in the phrase. Once the phrase was complete, the design became the most important focus – particularly the choice of placing the progression of the piece along the diagonal and the desire to convey a mixture of being drawn as well as pushing towards the downstage right corner. Many of the pathways take a dancer through clusters of dancers or a group of dancers through another group, always moving along the chosen diagonal, thereby convey a sense of coming out through something. Furthermore, the downstage right corner became the dancers' frontal focus instead of the audience, requiring that all of their movements be directed along that diagonal. Additionally, the element of the invisible barrier offers the imagination an option of an atmosphere to be manipulated that is affecting the progress forward. Since many of the gestures for this vocabulary can be described with actions such as pushing, separating and slicing the movements may be viewed as the efforts to manipulate the atmosphere around the dancers. Thus, a sense of exploration and effort is built within the journey toward their desired destination – self-acceptance.

The Cascades by Fleet Foxes is split into sections with a steady crescendo as the piece progresses to the climax. The dancer at the invisible barrier presses into it as the music begins and is forced to recoil, causing all dancers to recoil and recede back to upstage left. The dancer repeats the press and recoil. The dancers brush each foot behind them like a bull preparing to

charge. Now, the dancers charge the barrier two at a time. Each pair of individuals fail to break the barrier and return to the group. This continues through the entire group until one final attempt by a single dancer, leading this dancer to find key to successfully breaking across the barrier by helping someone else to cross. The remaining two pairs are prompted to do the same. The result being that half of the group have crossed the barrier, and the other half are left behind the barrier. The half of the group left behind the barrier continue to attempt to break through, while those that had already broken through are pushing to meet them at the barrier in order help them across as they were helped. The pairs reach for each other and miss the first couple of attempts. Finally, the successful connection occurs and the remaining dancers are brought across the barrier.

After crossing the barrier, the movement quality becomes sustained, in order to convey a change in the atmosphere beyond the barrier. This quality is maintained through the end of *The Cascades* into the third section, *The Incline*, which is more deliberate and somber than the sections that precede it. The first section would be considered the introduction and rising action; the second would be considered the climax; this final section would be the falling action leading to the final action. The first two sections can be considered the acceleration to the moment of breakthrough. The movement becomes subtly quicker as the poetry progresses, indicating that the thickness of the new atmosphere is changing as the dancers navigate the new terrain.

Concurrently, the vocabulary begins to move away from the original gestural vocabulary into a range of whole body movements that reflect the lines spoken at the time of action. This build-up of momentum continue until the word “Stop” is spoken and all movement ceases for a second. The dancers resume movement, transitioning into the first unison phrase of the entire work. This unison is characterized predominantly by whole body, peripheral movements in the far reach space which travel short, straight pathways moving back and forth from stage left to right. These

short pathways mimic the back and forth pathways contained used in *Halfway Out of the Dark* but with a different vocabulary, indicating a similar intention to move forward from this location. The difference in vocabulary is indicative of the change in the individuals as a result of the journey. The line “One mountain climbed only to find another range in view” is spoken in this beat of the poetry. This line serves the essence of this section, conveying that the journey doesn’t end at the breakthrough. In fact, the breakthrough is just the beginning of the next leg of the journey.

A couple elements of *Breakthrough* set this piece apart from the preceding two pieces. One of the distinguishing elements is the choice to use poetry read by a female voice, whereas the text in *The Trouble with Masculinity* and *A Look Inside* were read by a male voice. This choice was made as a way to incorporate femininity into the work and to create a sense of softness for the remainder of the message. Furthermore, the nurturing characteristics of the speaker’s voice coupled with the poetry about hope, personal growth and the determination to continue pushing forward gently illuminate the purpose of the design.

Another element that distinguishes *Breakthrough* is the uniformity of the ensemble’s costuming. All dancers are costumed in the same attire as *A Look Inside* and the second dancer in *The Trouble with Masculinity*, except for the constricting black strap. There is no particularly highlighted individual in this piece, creating a community of individuals moving forward together. This was a conscious choice to convey that the nature of this piece is no longer about the opposition, but the determination to move past the opposition by putting all individuals on the same ‘side’ of the struggle to move forward. This choice also gives life to the story told during the second section, set to *The Cascades*, by allowing for the cooperation between the dancers. Consequently, this choice bears a clear message in light of the preceding messages. A

single individual can struggle with the societal expectations and even overcome them alone. But the true progress of greater value cannot be made alone – but in a community of individuals with a shared focus and the determination to move forward into the unknown.

Appendix 1a

Halfway Out of the Dark (2015)

Let there be light. And it was so.

Half the world covered in shine, have drenched in pitch

Black air so thick you can cut it with a knife.

Can't see my hand stretched out

I think, therefore I am light!

Remembered warm against this skin so cold to the bone.

Eternal night is breaking forever, is infinity finite?

Eyes closed, mind aware. The world revolves – I evolve, change, grow, enhance

Up and into the sacrosanct.

And now I stand steady, on a knife edge of hope, but hope none the less

Pulling me wildly, loudly, reverently

Directed solidly towards the daylight

Album: Halfway Out of the Dark

©The Poet and the Prophet

The Incline (2015)

Tested in this moment in time and space
All else seems forgotten as I feel ever distant, falling from grace
Shattering momentum breaks the silence
This pendulum swings never seeking guidance
Life invading, ever changing, expansive, recreating, renovating
Uploading and encoding these moments
Reacting to the ever evolving mass of revelation.
STOP! Listen. This time break away
Challenges unfolding anew.
One step forward, two steps back
One mountain climbed only to find another range in view.
With ferocious energy I continue on
Today, I will make a difference. Today, I will make these moments count.
One simple step at a time is all it takes.
Happily I head towards the incline.
Moving, simply on. Forever forward.
Up and out.

Album: Halfway Out of the Dark

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